[1] **Felix Mendelssohn**
in Words and Music
Written by Davinia Caddy
Read by Leighton Pugh

[2] **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809–1847)
Die beiden Neffen oder Der Onkel aus Boston
('The Two Nephews, or The Uncle from Boston') – Act I: Overture
from Hänssler Classic CD98.221 Disc 1 Track 1

[3] *Der Onkel aus Boston* ('The Uncle from Boston'), a three-act dramatic work by Felix Mendelssohn, begun in May 1822 and completed in November 1823. More specifically, we heard the opening of the Overture to the work, a *Singspiel* (literally, a sing-play): that is, a German-language music drama, often comic in nature, with spoken dialogue – the best-known example being Mozart's *The Magic Flute* of 1791. Certainly, Mendelssohn's *Singspiel* fits the generic stereotype: written to a libretto by family friend Johann Ludwig Casper, a physician who had studied in France and enjoyed its popular culture of vaudeville theatre, the drama revolves around the return to the German town of Brandenburg of one Baron von Felsig, a former Hessian soldier who had spent time in New England. Comic situations abound when family members meet and mistake each other's identities, leading to act upon act of complications requiring well-timed dramatic resolution. This is not to mention the Mozartian tendencies of the work, including spirited ensemble writing, lyrical arias and even Papageno-like patter, reminding audiences of *The Magic Flute*'s infamous bird-man and resident clown.

Despite the work's conformance to type, Mendelssohn's *Singspiel* still manages to surprise. For a start, there is the composer's age: *Der Onkel aus Boston* was first performed in February 1824, just after the composer's 15th birthday. By this time, the unusually prolific young musician had written three other *Singspiele*, the first when he was only 11. *Der Onkel*, in addition, was not premiered in a conventional theatre and was not even intended for the public. Quite the opposite: like the composer's earlier *Singspiele*, *Der Onkel* was first performed privately in the Mendelssohn family home – the garden house, historians have assumed.

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Perhaps most surprising is the basic fact that this *Singspiel* is by Mendelssohn. Yes, that's Mendelssohn, the composer who we tend to associate with instrumental repertoire and large-scale choral works, not with dramatic music – much of it comic, whimsical and seemingly impulsive – for the stage. Yet Mendelssohn maintained an interest in music theatre throughout his intense if relatively brief career and searched endlessly for a libretto suitable for operatic treatment. (Indeed, he rejected opportunities to work with well-known dramatists Eugène Scribe, J. R. Planché, Eduard Devrient and Karl Immermann.) Only one opera of his made it to the stage: *Die Hochzeit des Camacho* (Camacho's Wedding), based on an episode from the second part of Miguel de Cervantes's Spanish epic novel *Don Quixote*. But *Camacho*, premiered at the Berlin Schauspielhaus on 29th April 1827, was a failure: such was Mendelssohn's disappointment that he refused to release his next dramatic work (known in English as *Son and Stranger*) for the public stage, reserving the score as a gift for his parents' silver wedding anniversary. It was published posthumously.

As this short biographical tour will reveal, there is much that is unexpected about Mendelssohn's life and career. Historically, he has often been relegated to the second tier of nineteenth-century Austro-Germanic composers (below Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, Wagner, Liszt and Bruckner); or he has fallen into the cracks between the so-called Classics and the Romantics, his music harking back to Haydn, Mozart and J. S. Bach as much as forward to those more illustrious countrymen to follow. But Mendelssohn was not only a child prodigy to rival Mozart: he achieved great fame during his lifetime; in the 1830s and 40s, he found himself at the forefront of the musical scene not only in Germany, but in England too. He composed in the widest possible range of musical genres, embracing church music, songs, opera and oratorio, as well as the instrumental genres for which he is perhaps most famous nowadays – various string ensembles, symphonies and concertos.

Before we begin our tour, it might be worth signalling a theme that has cropped up again and again in the Mendelssohn literature: that is, the accumulation of biographies, style guides and essay collections that deal with the way the composer has been received historically. This theme relates to Mendelssohn's Jewish heritage. The grandson of an eminent Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, and the son of a prosperous Jewish banker, Abraham, the young Mendelssohn was secretly baptized into the Protestant faith, along with his three siblings, on 21st March 1816. On his conversion, the seven-year old Felix was given the additional names 'Jakob Ludwig'; on his parents' conversion, six years later, the family added the surname 'Bartholdy'. (Apparently, the addition came at the suggestion of Mendelssohn's maternal uncle Jakob Salomon-Bartholdy: Bartholdy was the surname of the family from whom Uncle Jakob had bought a dairy farm and, as a name, was thought to sound 'Protestant'.) Commentators over the centuries have sought to make much out of Mendelssohn's religious identity: regrettably, there is much in the literature that is anti-Semitic at worst, not least the writings of compatriot and contemporary Richard Wagner. In recent years, scholars have attempted to reassess Mendelsohn's career and his musical output with an open mind to his intentions, his family relations, his association with

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other composers and intellectuals, his various positions and paid employment, and his reception by critics and audiences. Research has revealed that, far from immersing himself in the spiritual debates and disputes of his era, Mendelssohn seems to have passed over them entirely. 'He was', in the words of one commentator, 'far too absorbed in the shaping of his own life and career.'

[4] **Sechs Kinderstücke, Op. 72 ('Six Children's Pieces') – No. 1. Allegro non troppo**
from Naxos 8.578079-80 Disc 1 Track 19

[5] An extract from Mendelssohn's piano collection *Kinderstücke* (Children's Pieces), published after the composer's death in 1847. Children's piano albums of this kind – with simple tunes, catchy rhythms and easy two-part textures – gained in popularity in the nineteenth century as learning the piano, a symbol of status and taste, became a highly desirable accomplishment.

Felix Mendelssohn was indeed an accomplished child. Born on 3rd February 1809 in Hamburg, Mendelssohn and family moved to Berlin in July 1811. There, encouraged by private tutors, the young Mendelssohn studied languages, history, geography and arithmetic, read literature widely (including Caesar and Ovid), and even penned, age 11, a mock epic poem called *Paphlëis* documenting the adventures of his brother Paul, given the Greek name Paphlos. Written in hexameters, the poem was ostensibly a parody of Goethe's *Achillëis* of 1808, revealing the youngster's literary talent and keen interest in ancient Greek art and culture.

As for his early musical education, overseen by his mother Lea, Mendelssohn studied the piano, organ and violin, and attended rehearsals of the Berlin Singakademie chorus with his sister Fanny, also musically-gifted. In music theory and composition, Mendelssohn learned from the German composer, conductor and director of the Singakademie Carl Friedrich Zelter, a flagbearer for the Baroque and Classical masters, especially the music of J. S. Bach. Testament to Zelter's disciplined tuition is one of Mendelssohn's surviving compositional workbooks, with careful exercises in musical harmony and counterpoint, canon and fugue, and pieces in variation and sonata forms. The young Mendelssohn, it appears, was inspired to emulate the Classical greats, with both Haydn and Mozart studied as models of musical technique, style and structure. Also surviving from this period is Mendelssohn's earliest known composition, *Lied zum Geburtstag meines guten Vaters* (Song for my Dear Father's Birthday), dated 11th December 1819. Written by a ten-year-old Mendelssohn to an anonymous text, the short piece takes the form of a simple strophic song, its melody couched within a hymn-like G Major:

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"Let these strings sound out happily,
Ring out more resoundingly today—
A happy song of jubilation,
Offered by his children's love."

[6] **Lied zum Geburtstag meines guten Vaters**
from Champs Hill CHRCD056 Track 12

[7] By his early teens, Mendelssohn had already acquired an impressive portfolio of musical compositions across a range of genres: chamber music, psalm settings, string sinfonias and keyboard works. Of the latter, the Piano Quartet in C Minor is of particular note as Mendelssohn's first published work, appearing in print in 1823 as his Opus 1. Written on holiday in Geneva in the autumn of 1822, the work betrays the composer's keen enthusiasm for Mozart: not only is Mendelssohn's music clearly modelled on Mozart's characteristic classical style, his thematic material is thought to derive from a particular source – Mozart's Piano Sonata in C Minor, catalogue number K.457.

Mozart analogies were in fact quite common, Mendelssohn – then aged 15 – described by Zelter as a 'mature' musician, 'in the brotherhood of Bach, Haydn and Mozart'. The esteemed German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe spoke similarly. Nowadays considered the greatest genius in German history, Goethe was enamoured by the young Mendelssohn from their first meeting in November 1821, the poet in his 70s. Presented to Goethe by Zelter as a child prodigy, Mendelssohn impressed with his performance of Bach fugues and a piano arrangement of Mozart's overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*, also sight-reading scores by Beethoven. Similar praise was forthcoming from the characteristically dour Luigi Cherubini, director of the Paris Conservatoire, one of Europe's most prestigious music schools. Sought out by Abraham Mendelssohn on a trip to the French capital taken by father and son in the spring of 1825, Cherubini offered what was for him rare commendation ('the boy is rich in talent'), inviting the teenage Felix to stay a while longer in Paris and receive further tuition. While Abraham declined the offer on his son's part, the two enjoyed an eventful Parisian sojourn, meeting a number of virtuoso musicians who had assembled there: the pianists Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Isaac Ignaz Moscheles, Friedrich Kalkbrenner and the 14-year old Franz Liszt; violinists Pierre Baillot, Rodolphe Kreutzer, Alexandre Boucher and Pierre Rode; composer and theorist Antoine Reicha; and leading opera composers Gioachino Rossini, Daniel Auber and Fromental Halévy. Mendelssohn also found occasion to write perceptive if critical reports back home to Berlin, commenting disparagingly on Liszt (who possessed 'many fingers but not much intelligence') and Cherubini himself (an extinct volcano that occasionally spewed forth with ash).

Home was soon to change physical location, as the Mendelssohn family moved into a grand if somewhat dilapidated mansion at 3 Leipzigerstrasse, off the Leipzigerplatz,

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Berlin. There, Goethe's 'second Mozart' came into contact with an ever widening circle of cultural and intellectual elites: the poets Heinrich Heine, Karl von Holtei and Ludwig Börne; the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel; classicist August Böckh; and scientist Alexander von Humboldt – who erected a small structure in the family garden to record magnetic measurements. Benefitting considerably from the local intelligentsia, Mendelssohn continued to develop academically, reading novels by Jean Paul and plays by Shakespeare, reissued in 1825 in the German translations of Ludwig Tieck and August Wilhelm von Schlegel – whose brother, incidentally, married Mendelssohn's aunt Dorothea.

The composer's musical development also continued apace as he produced two stand-out works that would represent the tipping-point in his musical apprenticeship. The first, a string Octet, has since been lauded as 'miraculous', an 'astonishing feat of virtuosity', 'the most impressive work of art ever produced by someone so young', and 'a manifest proclamation of youth and hope'. High praise, indeed. Composed soon after the family moved house, and most probably premiered toward the end of 1825 at one of the regular Sunday concerts held there, the Octet ushered in the dawn of a new musical genre, its eight instruments interacting freely as a single performing force. The third-movement Scherzo, which became famous as a standalone piece during Mendelssohn's lifetime, is thought to have taken inspiration from the 'Walpurgisnacht' scene from Goethe's *Faust*. As Fanny described:

> *"Everything is new and strange, yet at the same time utterly persuasive and enchanting. One feels so near the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end the first violin takes a flight with feather-like lightness, and – all has vanished."*

[8] **String Octet in E flat major, Op. 20 – III. Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo**
from Naxos 8.557270 Track 3

[9] A similar musical atmosphere was created in the second of Mendelssohn's towering early works: his Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, finished in early August 1826 and, like the Octet, most probably first performed in the family home. An independent concert overture that was not intended to accompany a staged performance of Shakespeare's play, the piece was simply inspired by its dramatic contents. (As it so happens, the play was a favourite of the Mendelssohn children who would regularly perform Shakespeare at home, acting out the different parts.) Conjuring the world of fairies, elves and magic, the opening music is particularly evocative. Indeed, some claim that Mendelssohn wrote the initial four chords after hearing an evening breeze rustle through the leaves in his garden.

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[10] **A Midsummer Night's Dream – Overture, Op. 21**
from Naxos 8.554433 Track 1

[11] The period also witnessed the intensification of Mendelssohn's historical interest in earlier styles, particularly sacred vocal music. Having examined the estate of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, which contained autograph scores by Wilhelm's father Johann Sebastian, Mendelssohn crafted cantatas in the style of the elder Bach, finding in his music what one commentator calls 'an ideal balance between craftsmanship and art, technique and expression, mind and soul'. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that it is during this same period that Mendelssohn arrived at the momentous decision to revive Bach's large-scale liturgical work the *St Matthew Passion*. Having received a copy of the score from his maternal grandmother, Bella Salomon, toward the end of 1823, Mendelssohn studied Bach's music for a number of years before the much celebrated concert performance, with the Berlin Singakademie chorus and orchestra, in March 1829. As historians remind us, nineteenth-century audiences were used to hearing and performing music by contemporary composers, as well as the Classical greats. Bach's music lay far back in the past: moreover, his St Matthew Passion had never been heard outside Leipzig, where it was first performed during Good Friday Vespers in the Thomaskirche on 11th April 1727.

It was not only Bach whom Mendelssohn sought to emulate. Dating from late 1828 is Mendelssohn's monumental *Hora est*, a sacred choral work with organ accompaniment inspired by seventeenth-century Italian polychoral tradition. More specifically, Mendelssohn was motivated by a mass for 16 voices, dating from 1786, by the German composer Carl Friedrich Christian Fasch. Fasch himself had been inspired by a 16-voice mass by the seventeenth-century Roman composer Orazio Benevoli. Finding Benevoli's music monotonous and lacking in variety, Fasch had set out to explore new and different arrangements of voices, leading to a passage of impressive 16-part counterpoint, a triumph of musical technique and imitative part-writing. Mendelssohn responded to Fasch's experiment with his own 16-part work, also attempting complex imitative counterpoint. Mendelssohn's piece, gifted to Fanny on her 23rd birthday (14th November 1828), also captivates the listener with a grandeur of style and a different kind of musical part-writing – chordal, sustained and extremely slow-moving. *Hora est*, in the view of the nineteenth-century music critic Adolf Bernhard Marx, captures the mysteries of early Christian monastic rites.

[12] **Hora est**
from Hänssler Classic HC20034 Track 13

[13] 1829 saw the beginning of Mendelssohn's Grand Tour of Europe, a series of excursions that took the composer north to Scotland and south to Italy, both countries providing

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inspiration for symphonies he would go on to write. But before Scotland came England, where Mendelssohn sampled both intellectual and popular culture, and took in some of the sights. He visited both the House of Commons and St Paul's Cathedral; he attended fashionable balls and enjoyed productions of Shakespeare's plays; and he consulted with the well-known phrenologist Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, who examined his skull of which he made a plaster mould. As for his musical appearances, Mendelssohn conducted his Symphony No. 1 in C Minor with the Philharmonic Society; he appeared as a soloist, alongside Moscheles, in his Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra; and he witnessed the English premiere of his Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In addition, Mendelssohn studied Handel's manuscripts housed in the King's Library of the British Museum, and he made new musical acquaintances, including the French critic François Joseph Fétis and the Spanish singer Maria Felicia Malibran.

In Scotland, Mendelssohn found a specific stimulus: not only for his Scottish Symphony, which he would not complete for another 12 years, but his 'Hebrides' Overture – like the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a concert work unattached to a dramatic production. This now-popular orchestral piece was inspired by Mendelssohn's August 1829 excursion to Fingal's Cave on the uninhabited island of Staffa in the Inner Hebrides, off Scotland's west coast. Travelling with friend Carl Klingemann, Mendelssohn observed the arched roof of the cave – to Sir Walter Scott, 'one of the most extraordinary places I ever beheld' – and experienced its magnificent natural acoustics which echoed the sound of waves crashing below. According to a postcard written to sister Fanny back home in Berlin, Mendelssohn immediately scribbled what would become the main theme of the Overture, confessing (while echoing Scott) 'how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me'.

[14] **The Hebrides Overture, Op. 26 'Fingal's Cave'**
from Naxos 8.550222 Track 5

[15] At the home of a wealthy mine-owner in north Wales, the next stop in his tour, Mendelssohn first contemplated a large-scale orchestral work now known as the Reformation Symphony. The work has a curious history, in that it was intended to feature at celebrations for the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, which in 1530 had established Lutheran Protestantism in northern Europe. But not only was the work completed too late for the June 1830 celebrations, it had not been formally commissioned by the King (Friedrich Wilhelm III): as a result, it had no official place in the proceedings. Moreover, historians have wondered why Mendelssohn, in writing for such an occasion, opted for a symphony, without words, when a grand choral work on a sacred text would surely have been more appropriate. Certainly, it seems that the composer wanted his score to exude a religious musical character: the symphony's finale featured Luther's chorale 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' (A Mighty Fortress is Our God), introduced by solo flute, then joined by woodwind and strings.

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After his travels to England, Scotland and Wales, Mendelssohn went, via Vienna, on to Italy: Florence, Naples, the Isle of Capri, Pompeii, Milan and, of course, Rome. In the Italian capital, the composer consulted Palestrina scholar Giuseppe Baini, examined a local library of Italian sacred polyphony and sent reports home about the accession of Gregory XVI, the February Carnival and the Easter services in the Sistene Chapel, where the papal choir performed Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere*, a setting of Psalm 51 written in the 1630s for the exclusive use of the choir. Returning to Paris, Mendelssohn made contact with pianist-composer Frédéric Chopin, Grand Opéra specialist Giacomo Meyerbeer, German musician Ferdinand Hiller and poet Heinrich Heine. While some of his music (the Octet and Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) was performed at the Paris Conservatoire, Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony was rejected by the Conservatoire orchestra, whose musicians described it as 'too learned', with 'too much fugato' and 'too little melody'. The composer's spirits were dampened further by bad news from Germany: the death of Eduard Rietz, Mendelssohn's former violin teacher and the dedicatee of his Octet, and the death of Goethe. After having caught Asiatic cholera following an outbreak in the French capital, Mendelssohn went back to London only to receive word of a third death, that of his former mentor and composition teacher Zelter.

Arriving home in Berlin, the composer seems to have lost a sense of his musical footing. He rejected a libretto from Karl Immermann for an opera for Munich, and he failed in his attempt to secure directorship of the Singakademie following Zelter's death –he lost out to Carl Friedrich Rungenhagen, Zelter's former assistant. But, happily enough, two new opportunities presented themselves. First, Mendelssohn received from the London Philharmonic Society a commission for three new works: a concert aria (to be titled 'Infelice'); a concert overture (*Die Schöne Melusine*, inspired by an opera by Conradin Kreutzer); and, the grandest of the three, a symphony – now known simply as the 'Italian'. The last, a triumph at its premiere on 13th May 1833, was another vaguely pictorial work by a composer now well known for his evocative scene-scapes. Praised by critics for its 'warmth' and 'southern aspect', the symphony inspired images of Mediterranean sunshine, bright blue skies, pastoral landscapes and vineyards. But there was nothing specifically Italian about it – at least, not until the finale, which was based on a raucous Tuscan dance known as the 'Saltarello'. This, though, was no sunny conclusion: reversing the usual progression of the nineteenth-century symphony ('from darkness to light', an angst-ridden minor key to a majestic major), the final movement sounded, to one critic, 'like a dark reflection of the first one'.

[16] Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90 'Italian' – IV. Saltarello: Presto
from Naxos 8.553200 Track 8

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[17] The second opportunity to present itself on Mendelssohn's return to Berlin, following his European tour, was the directorship of the 15th Niederrheinisches Musikfest (The Lower Rhine Music Festival) to be held in Düsseldorf between 26th and 28th May 1833. Abraham joined Mendelssohn for the occasion and reflected on the success of his eldest son, then 24 years of age:

> *"I have never seen anybody so petted and courted as he is here. He himself cannot enough praise the zeal of all the performers, and their perfect confidence in him. And, as it always has been, his playing and his memory astound everybody."*

Watching his son in rehearsal for Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, the highlight of the festival, Mendelssohn senior continued:

> *"To me at least it does appear like a miracle that four hundred persons of all sexes, classes, and ages, blown together like snow before the wind, should let themselves be conducted and governed like children by one of the youngest of them all, too young almost to be a friend for any of them, and with no title or dignity whatever."*

The eventual performance of Handel's work at the festival reflected more than strong and disciplined leadership from the rostrum. Mendelssohn had undertaken intensive academic scrutiny of Handel's original score while in London, a score that included movements not in the Berlin Singakademie copy (which the composer had originally planned to borrow). In addition to these previously unknown movements, the composer inserted a piece of his own, his 'Trumpet' Overture in C Major dating from March 1826. Reportedly his father's favourite work, the Overture begins with a fanfare-like motif that, recurring throughout the piece, inspires a sense of regal grandeur, pomp and ceremony.

[18] **Overture in C major, Op. 101 'Trumpet'**
from Capriccio C10708 Track 1

[19] The success of Mendelssohn's directorship of the Düsseldorf festival – to one commentator, 'the greatest public success that he had yet had in Germany' – led to a three-year appointment as director of music in the city. Beginning in October 1833, this was in fact Mendelssohn's first paid appointment, and one that would stretch his musical abilities in different directions. For the position embraced contrasting musical genres – sacred and secular, music for the church, the concert hall and the theatre. Particularly important among his regular duties was the monthly preparation of a major sacred work by Mozart, Haydn, Cherubini, Beethoven and others, as well as music from earlier periods (Palestrina and Lotti). Mendelssohn also furthered his revival of the oratorio, presenting Handel's *Messiah*, *Solomon* and *Judas Maccabaeus*, as well as Haydn's *The Seasons* and *The Creation*. He even found time to contemplate an oratorio of his own, *St Paul*, based on *The Acts of the*

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Apostles; and he consulted with the German scholar Julius Schubring who would later write the libretto. In addition to these sacred musical activities, Mendelssohn mounted stage works including Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Cherubini's *Les Deux Journées*, and Weber's *Oberon* and *Der Freischütz*. While he harboured operatic ambitions of his own, none would come to fruition.

After only two years, Mendelssohn grew tired of his post in Düsseldorf and requested that he be relieved of his duties. For new job offers had been made: one, to direct the opera in Munich; two, to direct the Gewandhaus orchestra in Leipzig, with additional municipal duties; three, to edit a leading music periodical, the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*; four, to become a critic for Robert Schumann's popular *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*; and five, to take up a Professorship at the University of Berlin. The sheer variety of highly coveted positions is testament to Mendelssohn's extensive range of skills: he was widely known as a leading conductor, a skilled director, a brilliant pianist, an astute scholar and a keen intellect in all matters musical. He was, it appeared, on the way to becoming the consummate musical professional.

Mendelssohn chose Leipzig, no doubt attracted by the city's association with J. S. Bach, who had spent a large part of his career overseeing music in the town's Thomaskirche. Then there was the Gewandhaus orchestra, one of the most prestigious ensembles in all of Europe. The opportunity to take over the reins – from the German composer and conductor Christian August Pohlenz – must have been attractive beyond all measure. Indeed, Mendelssohn held the postion of *Gewandhauskappellmeister* until his death in 1847, although he shared duties at times with Ferdinand Hiller, Ferdinand David and the Danish Niels Gade.

Taking charge of the annual Gewandhaus concert season, which ran from October to March, Mendelssohn sought to both consolidate and extend a repertoire of German classical music. He staged a series of historical concerts, chronologically organized to showcase music from the previous one hundred years to the present; and he programmed premieres by leading composers, including Schumann's First, Second and Fourth Symphonies, and Schubert's Ninth. In addition, Mendelssohn conducted some of his own works, and introduced concert versions of complete acts of repertory operas by Mozart, Gluck and Cherubini, as well as the latest operas in French, German and Italian traditions. Supplementary concerts gave audiences opportunity to see and hear visiting virtuoso performers (including Liszt), as well as Mendelssohn himself at the piano.

Mendelssohn also found time to direct music festivals held in other towns, including Cologne and, once again, Düsseldorf, as well as Brunswick and Birmingham. In Düsseldorf, 22nd May 1836, for example, the composer premiered *St Paul*, the oratorio he had been preparing, with librettist Julius Schubring, for approximately two years. It seems that Mendelssohn's attachment to the work was intensified by the death, in November 1835, of his father, who had anticipated its success in uniting 'old customs with modern means'. The

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chorus 'How Lovely are the Messengers', with a text appropriate for Saints' days, has proved timeless, becoming a staple of the Anglican choral repertoire following the oratorio's English premiere in Liverpool on 3rd October 1836.

[20] **Paulus, Op. 36 ('St Paul') – How lovely are the messengers** (sung in English)
from Naxos 8.572836 Track 7

[21] Roughly one month earlier, 9th September 1836, Mendelssohn had become engaged to Cécile Jeanrenaud, the daughter of a clergyman of the French Reformed Church in Frankfurt. They married, at that church, on 28th March the following year. Historian Philip Radcliffe recounts the beginning of their relationship, offering a portrait of a composer often described – and misunderstood – as equable and placid:

> *"At first, he showed no sign of his feelings, but, in order to test them, he deliberately went away on a visit to Scheveningen [near The Hague, a seaside town]; finding them unchanged he returned to Frankfurt, proposed and was accepted. Cécile was nearly nine years younger than Felix but had heard of him in her childhood; she had, however, pictured him as an irritable old gentleman, sitting at the piano in a satin cap and playing nothing but fugues. She herself was a less vivacious personality … and rather elusive, but of great charm, serenity and good sense. For anyone as restless and high strung as Felix, a wife of similar temperament would have been disastrous; Cécile, though not outstandingly gifted in that direction, was musical enough to sympathize with her husband's work and aims, and her calm and unobtrusive goodness was an admirable foil to his mercurial energy."*

Fanny agreed. In a letter to Klingemann, Mendelssohn's sister wrote positively of Cécile, also describing her character as a welcome counterbalance to her brother's:

> *"She is amiable, childlike, fresh, bright and even-tempered, and I consider Felix most fortunate for, though inexpressibly fond of him, she does not spoil him, but when he is capricious, treats him with an equanimity which will in course of time most probably cure his fits of irritability altogether. Her presence produces the effect of a fresh breeze, so bright and natural is she."*

Following their honeymoon in Strasbourg, Freiburg and Heidelburg, Mendelssohn undertook a variety of musical projects, including the composition of his Piano Concerto No. 2 in D Minor, premiered at the Birmingham Music Festival of September 1837; and the revision of three Latin motets, for female voices and organ, originally inspired by his Italian travels of 1830. More specifically, Mendelssohn looked back on his time in Rome where he had heard the singing of French nuns in the church of the Trinitá dei Monti at the top of the famous Spanish steps.

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[22] **Three Motets, Op. 39 – No. 1. Veni, Domine ('Hear my prayer, O Lord')**
from Naxos 8.572836 Track 9

[23] The next few years in Leipzig witnessed the completion of Mendelssohn's String Quartets Op. 44, his Piano Trio in D Minor, the Overture 'Ruy Blas' (intended to accompany a production of Victor Hugo's play of the same name), and the symphony-cantata 'Lobgesang' (Song of Praise), which premiered on 25th June 1840 at a festival, held in Leipzig, commemorating the quadricentennial of Johann Gutenberg's invention of printing by movable type. (Leipzig was considered the centre of book production in German-speaking lands.)

News of Mendelssohn's musical successes soon reached royalty, as the composer was lured to Berlin – initially for a one-year term – by none other than the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, a monarch keen to reinvigorate the arts in the city. One of Mendelssohn's first musical duties, under royal commission, was to provide incidental music for a revival of ancient Greek drama, including Sophocles's *Antigone* and, later, his *Oedipus at Colonus*. (Mendelssohn would also compose incidental music for a production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the New Palace, Potsdam, in October 1843. This was 16 years after completing his famous Overture.) In Berlin, the composer was also tasked with overseeing sacred music, creating works – in a new a cappella style – for a revised Prussian liturgy at Berlin Cathedral. But he did not wholly give up his activities in Leipzig. Disgruntled by growing confusion over the exact nature of his role in Berlin (he had been appointed first as Kapellmeister and then Generalmusikdirektor), Mendelssohn went on to resume some of his duties at the Gewandhaus. He also travelled to Dresden, in April 1843, to conduct *St Paul* on Palm Sunday, a performance praised by the city's new Kapellmeister, Richard Wagner. In June, Mendelssohn again visited Dresden, on this occasion to hear Wagner conduct his cantata 'Gott segne Sachsenland' (God Bless Saxony), written by Mendelssohn in honour of the Saxon monarch.

April 1843 was in fact doubly important, for it marked the opening of a new musical conservatory based in Leipzig, founded by Mendelssohn with the support of Friedrich August II. Now known as the Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn', the conservatory offered tuition in composition, violin, piano, organ and singing, as well as supporting classes in chamber and choral music, and lectures on music history. Students, who came from Germany and abroad, were expected to immerse themselves in the Leipzig musical scene, attending rehearsals and performances of the Gewandhaus and other local musical organizations. Mendelssohn was joined on the teaching staff by theorist Moritz Hauptmann (harmony and composition), Ferdinand David (violin), singers Ferdinand Böhme and Henriette Bühnau, Robert Schumann (piano and score reading) and organist Carl Ferdinand Becker (organ and music history).

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[24] **Organ Sonata in C minor, Op. 65, No. 2 – II. Allegro maestoso e vivace**
from Naxos 8.553583 Track 5

[25] It is easy to forget that, while Mendelssohn was most famous during his lifetime as a composer, conductor and virtuoso pianist, his skills extended to the organ. While he never held a church position as an organist, had little formal tuition and not a single organ pupil of his own, Mendelssohn was fascinated by the instrument which played an important role in his personal life. As organ expert William A. Little has written:

> *"In the course of his many travels, whether in major cities or tiny villages, he invariably gravitated to the organ loft, where he might spend hours playing the works of Bach or simply improvising. Although the piano clearly served Mendelssohn as an eminently practical instrument, the organ seems to have been his instrument of choice. He searched out an organ loft, not because he had to, but because he wanted to, because on the organ he could find catharsis. Indeed, as he once exclaimed to his parents after reading a portion of Schiller's* Wilhelm Tell*, 'I must rush off to the monastery and work off my excitement on the organ!'"*

Although Mendelssohn is thought to have given only one public organ recital in Germany, he composed a number of short works for the instrument, including the Organ Sonata No. 2 in C Minor, of which we just heard an extract from the second movement.

In the late summer of that same year, Mendelssohn completed what would be one of his final masterpieces, the Violin Concerto in E Minor. Described by the great Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim as 'the dearest of all German violin concertos, the heart's jewel', the concerto was dedicated to Ferdinand David, the leader of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra. Its completion is thought to have marked Mendelssohn's debt of gratitude to David (who had given him many suggestions over a six-year period), as well as his relief at finally giving up his professional ties to Berlin. The work, nowadays a firm favourite within the violinist's repertoire, is well known for its structural innovations: the immediate entrance of the soloist, after only two bars of orchestral accompaniment; the positioning of the cadenza (an unaccompanied and technically brilliant passage) not at the end of the movement, as is customary, but within its central 'development' section; and the transition, played by bassoon, from the hauntingly lyrical first movement to the tranquil world of the second. Following another innovative transition, the lively last movement exemplifies the atmospheric musical style that Mendelssohn had crafted so carefully in his Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This kind of light-weight, gossamer-textured 'fairy' music had by now become a hallmark of Mendelssohn's musical style – and a striking contrast to the turbulent and hot-headed Romanticism favoured by other composers of the time.

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[26] **Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64 – III. Allegro molto vivace**
from Naxos 8.550153 Track 3

[27] *Hear My Prayer*, a short standalone piece of sacred choral music also composed in 1844, cannot be described as a masterpiece. Nonetheless, the work features one of Mendelssohn's most memorable melodies: 'Oh for the wings, for the wings of a dove'. Along with the composer's 'Wedding March' (from his incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and his *Festgesang* cantata (which features what is now known as 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'), the 'Wings of a Dove' theme is widely recognizable: indeed, it has acquired a near-universal appeal. Composed for a Victorian, rather than German, audience, the work was premiered in January 1845 at Crosby Hall in London. As historians have recognized, Mendelssohn was arguably more celebrated by English audiences than any German composer – before and since.

[28] **Hear my prayer, WoO 15**
from Naxos 8.572836 Track 8

[29] Ten years after the premiere of *St Paul*, Mendelssohn turned his attention once again to the genre of the oratorio: the result was *Elijah*, often described as another of the composer's final masterpieces. Unlike *St Paul*, *Elijah* was a commissioned work – from the Committee for the Birmingham Music Festival of 1846. In fact, Mendelssohn had been invited to direct the festival: but he declined the offer, willing only to provide a new and large-scale choral work. According to some sources, Mendelssohn first had the idea of basing such a work on the figure of Elijah back in the late 1830s. But he only set pen to paper in 1845, crafting his music around a text compiled from the first Book of Kings by Julius Schubring – the librettist of *St Paul*. For the Birmingham premiere, on 26th August 1846, an English translation by William Bartholomew was used: Bartholomew had also prepared the English-language text for *Hear My Prayer*, heard a moment ago. Eight movements, at the first performance of *Elijah*, were encored. After some revisions (Mendelssohn had the habit of tinkering with works following their premieres), *Elijah* was heard again in London on 16th April 1847 during one of the composer's many visits to England. A further London performance was attended by Queen Victoria and Prince George. Incidentally: the two were very familiar with Mendelssohn and his music. During visits to Buckingham Palace, the composer had improvised on the 'Rule Britannia' theme and even accompanied at the piano the Queen's performance of the song 'Schöner und schöner schmückt sich' (Fairer and Fairer). As for *Elijah*, it was first heard in Germany in October 1846; Mendelssohn did not survive to attend the Vienna premiere on 14th November.

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[30] **Elijah, Op. 70 – Part II, No. 42. Alsdann wird euer Licht hervorbrechen ('And then shall Your light break forth')**
from Naxos 8.572228-29 Disc 2 Track 23

[31] Mendelssohn died on 4th November 1847 following a series of strokes. This was roughly six months after the death of his beloved sister Fanny, a death which had affected him greatly and to the extent that he was for a time unable to compose. Yet on the whole, as historians have noted, Mendelssohn's life seems to have been relatively trouble-free. In the words of Paul Elek:

> *"He never knew want, family quarrels, thwarted affections or a bitter battle for artistic recognition, of the kind that undermined the strength of Mozart and Schubert – two musicians who, with him, form an extraordinary trio of miraculous musical creative precocity. His vitality was not sapped, as is so often the case with prodigies. He deeply mourned the loss of his beloved ones, he was not completely spared professional vexation, inevitable in a life lived from childhood in the glare of publicity, and sometimes signs of failing health depressed him as forebodings of an early death. But his letters give the impression of an exceptionally happy human being, centred in, and satisfied with himself; never waning in his aims, never doubting his specific vocation, never torn by inner conflicts…"*

Curiously, it seems that this very lack of 'inner conflicts' has negatively affected our appreciation of Mendelssohn's music. Or, again in the words of Elek:

> *"It has been said more than once that, had the balance sheet of his life ledger been more heavily weighted on the debit side, the work of Mendelssohn might have benefited."*

This line of argument might well ring true. How often have we applauded the tortured Romantic-genius or the politically-minded composer-dissident? How often have we sought in their music signs of an angst-ridden life, of struggle and torment? Put bluntly, we have tended to assume that the more difficult the life, the more worthy the music – the more distress the composer endured, the more satisfaction the listening experience can provide. The result, for Mendelssohn, is that his music has been 'blamed' for its good cheer, charm and elegance, its perfect symmetry, its delicate beauty and equable moods – at base, for its equivalence with Mendelssohn's personality traits, his character and fairly luxurious lifestyle. Some have even argued that the composer's cultured upbringing and fashionable worldliness led to sluggishness and complacency.

We might conclude, then, by noting the challenge that Mendelssohn lays down to the listener: the challenge to disengage life from works – even, to disengage words from music. Certainly, the accumulation of histories of Mendelssohn's life and career – an expanding

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literature that documents the composer's relatively easy existence – should not blight our assessment of his music. Sometimes, perhaps, that music is best sampled without words. As Mendelssohn himself suggested in the title he gave to his short solo piano pieces, written at various points throughout his life, *Songs Without Words*.

[32] Lieder ohne Worte ('Songs without Words'), Book 5, Op. 62 – No. 28 in G major, Op. 62, No. 4
from Naxos 8.550453 Track 10

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